

Q&A on Basic Skills Assessment for Teachers

Overview: In 2000, the legislature passed HB 2760, which created the Washington Professional Educator Standards Board (PESB). In addition to its broad advisory duties related to high standards for Washington educators, the PESB was given rulemaking authority to establish a new system for assessing the basic skills and content knowledge of prospective teachers applying for residency certification in Washington State.

Q. Why do we need a new basic skills test? Don't we require individuals who want to be teachers to demonstrate competency in basic skills now?

- A.** It is true that there are already requirements for admission to teacher preparation programs. All 22 of our state's approved higher education teacher preparation programs have basic skills requirements for admission to their programs, but these requirements vary considerably. The Governor, Legislature, State Board of Education, and Superintendent of Public Instruction proposed establishing a single, uniform means of assessing basic skills competency of all teaching candidates statewide.

Washington joins 45 other states that currently require a basic skills test for teachers prior to certification.

Q. Who has to take this test?

- A.** All individuals applying for admission to state-approved teacher preparation programs and teachers from other states applying for a Washington residency teaching certificate are required to meet the minimum passing score on the basic skills assessment. The law allows the PESB to establish exceptions to this requirement for individuals from other states or applicants to master's degree level teacher preparation programs who have demonstrated basic skills proficiency either through another, equivalent basic skills assessment or by other alternatives approved by the PESB. The PESB may permit other exceptions on a case-by-case basis.

Q. When does this become a requirement?

- A.** Beginning September 1, 2002 anyone admitted to a state approved teacher preparation program or applying for a residency teaching certificate must pass the basic skills test.

Q. What are "basic skills"?

- A.** Basic skills assessments typically test knowledge in reading, writing and mathematics. Test items will likely be in various formats, including short answer, extended response, and an essay writing sample for the writing assessment and multiple choice for the mathematics assessment.

Q. How hard is the test?

- A.** The difficulty of the test will be determined to a large extent by an advisory committee of Washington educators. During the piloting phase, this committee will review the reading, writing and mathematics skills measured by this assessment and specify which basic skills are important for all teachers.

A basic skills test must have “job validity”, that is, it must assess whether the prospective teacher has basic skills in reading, writing, and mathematics to do the job of teaching. For example, even teachers who are not teaching math must be able to assign grades and interpret data about student scores on tests, so competency in understanding and calculating percentages is important for all teachers.

Q. Who will set the passing score? How will it be set?

- A.** Legislation authorizes the PESB to set the passing score on the assessments for prospective teachers. The PESB will establish a standards setting process to get recommendations from Washington educators and testing experts regarding an appropriate passing score. After the first full administration on August 24th, a panel of Washington educators, as well as the PESB’s Technical Advisory Committee will examine the content of the test, difficulty of the questions and examinees’ performance, to determine the level of performance needed to pass the basic skills test. With the benefit of their recommendations, the PESB will set a passing score at their September 24-25 meeting.

Q. What if someone doesn’t pass the test?

- A.** Higher education teacher preparation programs will have discretion in admitting individuals who have not achieved the minimum passing score on the basic skills assessment. However, teacher candidates must pass the assessment to receive residency certification. Individuals taking the test, as applicants for a residency teaching certificate must achieve the minimum passing score or meet one of the criteria for exceptions to the test. Individuals will also have opportunities to re-take the test.

Q. What are criteria for exceptions from the test requirement?

- A.** Criteria for exceptions will be determined by the PESB. The law allows the PESB to set criteria for allowing out-of-state applicants for residency certification, applicants to master’s degree level teacher preparation programs, and others on a case-by-case, to demonstrate they have met requisite basic skills based upon completion of another basic skills assessment.

Q. What will the results tell us?

- A.** Primarily, the results will tell us whether the individual meets state-established standards for level of basic skills competency required of teachers to be certified. This provides the public with assurance that all teachers have basic skills in reading, writing, and mathematics. It will also provide us insight into the caliber of individuals who wish to pursue teaching in Washington.

Q. Will the scores of applicants be published?

- A.** Individual scores are protected by privacy laws and will not be published. An applicant's scores will be sent to the applicant and institutions designated by the applicant. The PESB will work with the institutions to ensure that the method of transmitting the applicant's scores protects the individual's privacy and meets the needs of the institution's records system. Subject to the regulations of Title II (federally funded programs), higher education institutions may be required to report the passing rate of their students.

Q. A criticism of many tests is that they are biased, resulting in a disproportionate number of minority test-takers failing. How will this be prevented on this test?

- A.** The PESB will establish a Fairness Committee, composed of educators who represent Washington's diverse population. Their job will be to review the content of the tests and monitor examinee's performance to ensure the basic skills test is a fair measure of basic skills for all examinees.

Q. Could you use a test like the SAT or GRE for this purpose?

- A.** These tests are designed for a different purpose. The SAT, for example, is a predictor of success in freshman year of college. This assessment should be specifically designed to measure attainment of basic skills required for teaching.

Q. How often will the test be offered?

- A.** The basic skills test will be given on six Saturdays per year (approximately every other month) and at nine locations across the state. Also, the test will be offered on an alternate day following the Saturday test administration for examinees unable to take the test on Saturday for religious or other reasons.

Q. What provisions are made for applicants from out of state and for international students to take the basic skills test?

- A.** The basic skills test will only be given in Washington. The law requiring this test gives the institutions the authority to admit these applicants prior to passing the basic skills test. These applicants must, however, pass the basic skills test before they can receive a residency teaching certificate

Q. Will there be a fee for the test?

- A.** Like the SAT, the GRE and other exams individuals routinely take for entrance into higher education or careers, there is a cost to the test-taker. The same is true for other professional licensure tests. The fee for the basic skills test will be \$81. This fee includes a \$30 registration fee and a \$17 fee for each of the three subtests. The PESB will also be working to identify means of providing financial assistance for those who cannot afford the test fee.

Q. What will happen to the various existing basic skills requirements of higher education institutions?

- A.** Higher education institutions can set additional requirements for admission above and beyond the basic skills test the PESB will implement, such as an additional writing samples or additional tests. Institutions may also eliminate their current test requirements given the new basic skills test requirement.

Q. Why aren't you testing all teachers, including those in the classroom now?

- A.** This requirement applies just to applicants to teacher education preparation programs and applicants for residency teaching certification.

Q. Why was the Professional Educator Standards Board given this responsibility?

- A.** The PESB is composed primarily of education practitioners, including teachers, administrators, educational staff associates, and representatives from higher education teacher training programs, all committed to upholding the highest standards for education professionals. As a board of some of our state's finest educators, they understand well what it takes to be a good teacher and are therefore best positioned to determine what is appropriate with regards to assessing the basic skills required to teach.